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Waiting at a coffee shop Monday as the evening rush hour crawled by, Sarah Snyder was trying to find the energy to get behind the wheel. Her 5-mile daily commute from Vernon Hills to Lincolnshire can take her 30 minutes.

"There's just more cars than the roads seem to be able to handle," Snyder, 38, said. "It's even backed up at 6 in the morning."

Beyond its clean air and scenic pastures, Lake County officials are hoping a \$6.8 million investment will ease the pain for drivers like Snyder.

Faced with a booming population and unable to fund major road projects, the county is turning to technology to solve its traffic woes, a move typically associated with highways, not local roads. Officials say the county's new traffic management center, unveiled Monday, will allow engineers to synchronize and adjust lights, reroute traffic around accidents and even cut the rush-hour commute.

"The old joke about Half Day Road being 'All Day Road' will become a part of our memory," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), who helped snare \$3.6 million in federal funds for the project while he was a member of the House Transportation Committee. "The average speed of traffic will increase. That will add 5 to 10 minutes to time with the family every day."

Snyder is skeptical.

"It's great in theory, but there's too many cars coming though," she said.

Dubbed an "intelligent transportation system," the Lake County network currently includes

nearly 100 cameras swiveling above intersections and 79 miles of fiber-optic cable buried beneath streets. The data is sent to dozens of television and computer screens in the Division of Transportation's Libertyville office.

`At the forefront'

"What they've done in Lake County is definitely at the forefront in this area of using high tech to battle congestion," said Illinois Department of Transportation spokesman Mike Claffey. "A lot of folks will be climbing on the bandwagon."

Cook, Will, DuPage, Kane and McHenry Counties all have said they have planned or are implementing networks similar to Lake County's.

About 56 of Lake County's 660 traffic signals are currently online, with another 100 to be added by the end of the spring, said Marty Buehler, director of the county's Division of Transportation. Another \$3.2 million in federal funds will be used to double the network again within a year.

Ideally, he said, every traffic signal in the county will be part of the network within 10 years.

A year ago, voters rejected a half-cent sales tax increase that county officials said would have generated millions of dollars to widen roads, add turn lanes and make signal improvements to improve traffic flow.

Without those funds, the county is largely limited to spending about \$20 million annually, primarily for patchwork on miles and miles of two-lane county roads.

Lake County Board Chairman Suzi Schmidt (R-Lake Villa) said the traffic management center should help but is not a cure-all.

"It's not going to give you new roads or widen existing roads," Schmidt said. "This is purely just making what we have faster and easier to get around. So we'll still need to widen and build new roads."

In the meantime, the county will use a Web site to provide information about road congestion (as IDOT already does for highways) and within a month will broadcast radio traffic advisories on 1620 AM.

Also, the county has roadside signs on order that it will be able to operate from the transportation management center.

Long wait for federal funds

Kirk said the County Board sought financial help with the project months after he was first elected in 2000. It took nearly a dozen meetings in Washington for the committee chairman to sign off, Kirk said.

"It took awhile to explain what the project was and why it is so important," he said.

About 75 cameras are currently measuring traffic flow with virtual sensors: black stripes superimposed over the lanes of traffic that turn green as vehicles pass through. Another 25 are zooming in and out on traffic and regularly rotating to get the latest views of congestion.

Information compiled from the network has already led to a longer green light at the intersection of Aptakisic and Buffalo Grove Roads in Buffalo Grove, where traffic was backing up during rush hour, said Tony Khawaja, the county's traffic engineer.

"Our objective is to make things as efficient as possible," he said. "That's the difference between constructing new lanes and managing the lanes you have."

Diana O'Kelly, chairman of the Lake County Board's Public Works and Transportation Committee, said the video is not recorded and promised that the cameras will not be put to a more insidious use.

"This is absolutely not used for law enforcement or to catch red light speeders," she said.